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ABSTRACT

A workshop for college engineering and business faculty in how to teach writing in their classrooms is one route to improving student writing skills. Any faculty development program needs strong administrative support. To overcome the problems both in condensing a knowledge of writing into a short session and in the objections of faculty to the added workload that assigning writing creates, the workshop leader should do the following: concentrate on defining conceptual difficulties in writing; convey the message in terms (especially visual terms) that match the audience's modes of perceptions; set a task to be accomplished in the workshop, such as the creation of a grading checklist; and convince participants that if their students write well, they will actually spend less time reading classwork. (Author/RL)

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WRITING WORKSHOPS FOR ENGINEERING AND BUSINESS FACULTY

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Presented at the 1979 CCCC

If writing is to be taught wherever it is used, the underlying assumption of this conference and a position gaining strength elsewhere in academe and the newspapers, then one way to improve student writing is to encourage all faculty to make appropriate courses writing-intensive and to arm faculty to engage in the conflict that implies. Let me briefly describe some workshops on assigning and evaluating student writing held for engineering and business faculty at The Ohio State University and Drexel University. Then I'll suggest some guidelines for anyone contemplating such workshops.

Approaches to Teaching Writing Where it is Used

Working with other teachers, of course, is one of several possible cooperative approaches. Another support system beyond the basic technical writing course is the writing laboratory or consultancy to which students repair either at their own initiative or on advice from faculty across the university. The centers may be staffed by faculty or by students, even engineering students, with particularly good writing skills who are then trained as tutors.[1] Cooperative teaching, as we have seen, is also effective. The degrees of cooperation vary: the same term paper may be submitted to two classes, one in technical writing and one in, say, civil engineering; a writing teacher and an engineering teacher may teach one group of students in one classroom; technical instructors may suggest term paper topics and sit in on final presentations in writing classes.

In another approach, writing teachers share with their colleagues a set of basic strategies for dealing with student writing. The approach has its difficulties. Both sides voice objections. English teachers shudder at the thought of covering in four or five hours--or even in four or five weeks--concepts of writing that took them years to develop. They fear the watering-down of their knowledge and the bastardizing of current research. Other faculty object to the extra time close reading of papers requires, especially with large classes and the demands of course content. Some, too, think that writing belongs to the English Department, often viewed as a service station to which students with malfunctioning sentences are sent to be fixed in courses. While it would be hard to find an academic who would disagree with the statement "writing is important," it is also hard to carry out that belief in margin after margin of student essays. Furthermore, there are innumerable difficulties in setting standards for writing and in enforcing standards even if they can be agreed upon.

Faculty Workshops

In spite of these difficulties, the Department of English at Ohio State, on the recommendation of the Faculty Senate of Arts and Sciences, forged ahead in Spring 1977 with workshops on assigning and evaluating student writing (see figure 1). The workshops were divided into a series for arts and sciences faculty and one for faculty in agriculture, engineering, and administrative sciences. Sixty-five faculty members participated in the latter

CS204862

set of three workshops. The numbers we felt were impressive. At first, the attendees sat in rows midway through the room, took out their pens and yellow pads, wrote 1.0 on the first line, and waited for answers. But then we began to discuss specific writing situations and, in particular, how good assignments predispose the student to good responses. We graded some sample papers together in the evaluation seminar, and tried to get through mechanics to the conceptual problems that are often at the root of both the technical and the writing difficulties in the paper.

At Drexel we are also working to encourage faculty to feel responsible for assisting their students in writing. We are using five tactics. First, as part of the program on faculty orientation day before classes began in September, we held a workshop on teaching writing in the engineering classroom. Second, at the request of the chairman of the Civil Engineering Department, we held a workshop for Research Assistants and Teaching Assistants in methods for evaluating laboratory reports. Third, faculty in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences who teach writing-intensive courses that enroll large numbers of engineering students gathered in a writing-skills workshop. The faculty participate in the Liberal Studies for Engineering Students program. This program resulted from the mandate of the Engineers' Council for Professional Development, the national accrediting body, to integrate humanities courses within the engineering curriculum.[2] For this writing workshop we developed a draft statement of standards to be maintained in the courses.

Fourth, engineering faculty are invited to discuss their views on writing at staff meetings of technical writing faculty. Such discussions help break down barriers between the groups, awaken interest in each other's concerns and, in part, encourage engineering faculty to be sensitive to writing, on the theory that you are most convinced by what you yourself say.

Fifth, in an effort to assist research faculty in their writing of proposals, the Graduate School conducts workshops on proposal writing and encourages faculty to consult with a writing specialist, another faculty member who does not edit proposals but meets with individuals about the design of the communications document. Such sessions further sensitize technical faculty to the real world of writing.

These, then, are some of the tactics we employ to encourage and arm faculty in what T.S. Eliot calls "the endless battle of words and meanings." As the literature and other sessions here make abundantly clear, other universities are waging similar campaigns. There is nothing revolutionary in the approach, but perhaps for that very reason it may prove useful.

Suggestions

Let me, though, share some suggestions with those of you who are interested in setting up a faculty workshop. These may assist in overcoming the difficulties mentioned earlier and always lurking in the wings.

1. Strong administrative support is essential. Richard E. Woodring, Dean of Engineering; Paul Dascher, Dean of Business and Administration;

and Robert Hallwachs, Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences at Drexel are committed to improving writing skills and have made their commitment known to faculty, who in turn are motivated to see writing as a priority. Without such support even coffee and doughnuts may fail to lure faculty into a writing workshop.

2. English teachers who shape the workshops need to sensitize themselves to their colleagues' patterns of thinking and teaching. At a university meeting recently, when I turned from my doodles and the list I was making of jargon the speaker was engaging in (impact--///////) to what the physics professor next to me was writing, I noticed that he was working out a series of equations on the back of the agenda. His principle language is mathematics, although he uses English too between the equations. Differences in perceptions need to be appreciated, integrated, and exploited for a workshop to work. One student complained to me about a writing teacher who "wasn't organized and didn't use the blackboard." He expects both in a teacher. Moreover, the student, like many technical faculty, is primarily visually oriented. We need in part to put our message in visual terms to assure transmission.

3. Conceptual problems in writing should be emphasized. It is easy for a faculty member to say "this student just can't write" and send the student to a writing class. It is hard to wrestle with the conceptual problems that underlie both the problems in substance and the problems in writing the student displays. Attitudes towards writing, moreover, are often internally inconsistent. The same person who throws up his hands at his student's inability to put ideas on paper and recommends a writing course may also see English teachers primarily as keepers of commas. Often elected secretaries of groups, especially if they are women, English teachers are less often included in theoretical and conceptual research projects and discussions where their special skills might be most useful in setting up the problem and encouraging better writing later on. While not ignoring mechanics, workshops should concentrate on rhetorical strategies. In particular, the criteria for good assignments should be stressed.[3] One economics professor told students to write a 10 page term paper as follows: "Assess the 1978 U.S. economy and predict the 1979." Perplexed students asked for clarification and were rebuffed. The professor got what he deserved when the papers came in.

4. Although simple consciousness-raising is an important goal of a workshop, the conduct of the workshop is smoothed if a specific objective is set, for example, a list of assignments or a checklist of standards.[4] I often find faculty workshops difficult because the participants sort themselves into two modes of behavior. Either they become students again, wait for truth to be deployed on the blackboard, do crossword puzzles, read letters. Or they remain teachers jumping to take over and not listening at all. Perhaps the committee model is the best one; the workshop becomes a meeting in which the draft of a standard on writing is debated. Such an approach reaches beyond the platitudes of Motherhood and Good Writing to, as the psychologists would say, some operational indicators.

5. To help motivate faculty to assign writing in their technical classes, one needs to convince them that the extra time spent in achieving better papers will save time in reading in the end, since presumably well written reports are easier to read than obscure ones. One needs to convince them that addition may indeed be subtraction, properly viewed.

Notes

[1] For an interesting discussion of a program to train engineering students as writing tutors see "Unique Writing Course for Student Engineers" in Chemical and Engineering News, January 15, 1979, pp. 28-29 and Ken Kiyama and Ellen Nold, "Engineering Students Teach Each Other to Write," Engineering Education 69 (January 1979), 334-37. The term "consultancy" has positive connotations that attract students and faculty alike; the term is used by Robert H. Weiss at West Chester State College.

[2] ECPD, "Objectives and Procedures for Accrediting Programs in Engineering in the United States," EC7.

[3] See D.C. Andrews, "I Just Don't Like It: A Guide for the Audience," in T.M. Sawyer, ed., Technical and Professional Communication (Ann Arbor: Professional Communication Press, 1977), pp. 168-172.

[4] See J.C. Mathes, Dwight W. Stevenson, and Peter Klaver, "Technical Writing: The Engineering Educator's Responsibility," Engineering Education 69 (January 1979) 331-334 for an excellent analysis of why and how engineering faculty should teach writing.

WORKSHOP 1: Assigning writing in the technical and business classroom

Like an experiment or any other basic research activity, a lab report, marketing study, final project report, or dissertation must be carefully prepared for and well designed. The student is simultaneously researcher and communicator. In this workshop we'll review some fundamentals of organization and expression (to bring you up to date) and then concentrate on how to write specifications and instructional manuals that will encourage good student reports. Both informational reports (based on secondary sources) and decision-making reports will be covered. Finally, we'll present some innovative assignments to help students write up their materials for actual audiences (like sponsors, clients, supervisors, journal readers) and prepare for the writing they will do on the job.

WORKSHOP 2: Evaluating writing in technical and business classes

You probably have enough trouble checking on the technical details of a report--the math and computer printouts--and making sure that the highway reported on will drain properly, without worrying about how the report is written. But content can't be divorced from expression, and you can help students improve both their technical understanding and their expression by using a checklist of common errors and a method for annotating and talking about reports with students that we will discuss in this workshop.

WORKSHOP 3: The Writing Program in the University

We'll discuss the kinds and quality of writing expected in different university courses at various levels. The uses of writing in technical and business classes, and the relationship between English department writing courses and technical and business writing, will be discussed.

Fig. 1 Notice of Workshops

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